

# The New York Times



## Biennial Tweaks Its Boundaries

By CAROL VOGEL

It has never happened before, and it will be another six years before the New York contemporary art planets align the same way again: Two sprawling contemporary surveys — the New Museum’s second-ever Triennial, which opened Wednesday, and the Whitney Museum of American Art’s 76th

Biennial, opening March 1 — will be on view simultaneously.

Given that different curators inevitably have different views, and that these two institutions also have distinct missions, it’s not surprising that they have come up with very different takes on the art of the moment. The New Museum has cast its net internationally, while the Whitney, being dedicated to American art, will be a bit more homegrown, although the biennial will include artists born elsewhere who happen to live and work here. Only one artist — the Los Angeles-based Wu Tsang, who identifies himself as “transfeminine” and “transguy” and who mixes art and politics in performances, filmmaking and installations — will be included in both shows.

The New Museum’s exhibition has been given a title, “The Ungovernables,” inspired by the 1976 student uprisings in South Africa, a term that, as its curator Eungie Joo put it, “could refer to an organized resistance,” and that suggests a show defined by political commentary from a group of artists who are mostly in their 20s and 30s.

The curators behind this year’s biennial — Elisabeth Sussman, a longtime Whitney curator, and Jay Sanders, a former director of the Greene Naftali Gallery in Chelsea and an independent curator — said they purposely stayed away from

any one theme, and while politics is obliquely addressed in some works, both see the contemporary art world today as too multifaceted to distill.

“We wanted to be incredibly open,” Ms. Sussman said, over lunch at Untitled, the Whitney’s restaurant, one recent afternoon. “We didn’t care if an artist had been in a biennial before. We wanted to show all different sorts of art.” The result is a group that includes seasoned practitioners like Robert Gober, Mike Kelley and Nicole Eisenman along with several younger, emerging artists whom few people will probably recognize. The age range is broad too, from artists in their late 20s to some in their 70s.

In other ways this biennial is modest. Whereas in past years it burst out of the Whitney’s Madison Avenue home, spilling into Central Park and the Park Avenue Armory, this time, as in 2010, it will be contained within the museum. The number of artists on view has shrunk from the 100 who were included in the 2006 exhibition — flusher times — to about half that number this year. “We were reacting against biennials where too much was crammed into the galleries so that no artist was shown to their best advantage,” Mr. Sanders said. “We tended to hold back and only pick things that really spoke to us.”

While the curators were careful to represent a spectrum of visual-art mediums — painting, sculpture, installation, video — there is new emphasis on the performing arts this year: dance, theater, music, film. For the first time the museum has removed most of the walls on its fourth floor, transforming it into a 6,000-square-foot space for performances. “By putting it on a dedicated floor it is front and center,” Mr. Sanders said. “It’s going to be the largest dance floor in New York after the Park Avenue Armory.”

Films, meanwhile, will be shown in timed screenings in a gallery on the second floor. These moves are a means “of getting away from little black spaces with film and video or performances within the galleries,” he added. “That had gotten tedious to us.” An assortment of high-profile figures like the choreographer Michael Clark, the theater director Richard Maxwell and the filmmakers Werner Herzog and Frederick Wiseman will be represented, along with a selection of younger and emerging talents.

Visitors beware: While the public can watch performers rehearsing during the day while the biennial is on, tickets are required for many of the events. (They can be bought on the museum’s [Web site](#).) “Our ideal viewer is going to come seven or eight times,” Mr. Sanders said. “We are treating this as though it is a performing arts center.”

In the main galleries, however, there are paintings, sculptures, installations and videos. “We tried to break away from what had become a formula of a lot of rooms filled with one-artist exhibitions that often resembled a commercial art fair instead of museum exhibitions,” Ms. Sussman said.

For now most of the visible advance work is being done by visual artists, who, along with art handlers and curators, are in the middle of the installation, a floor-by-floor process that is expected to take some three to four weeks.

This week the action was taking place on the third floor, where the first thing visitors will see as they step off the elevator will be two doors with old-fashioned brass knobs. Behind them Nick Mauss, a New York conceptual artist who has shown at Greene Naftali, has recreated a room by Christian Bérard — an artist, illustrator and set designer working in Paris during the 1930s and '40s — that still exists today at the Guerlain Institute in Paris. Featuring trompe-l'oeil paneling that Mr. Mauss has cut out and applied in velvet and ribbons, the room is a period piece of sorts that he has paired with a group of works from the Whitney's own collection, including a painting by Marsden Hartley, photographs by Warhol and Gary Winogrand and a lithograph by Ellsworth Kelly.

Mr. Mauss isn't the only artist looking backward. Nearby are four contemporary canvases inspired by Poussin's seminal 17th-century depictions of "The Four Seasons," only here they are hung on glass panels in the round, the work of the German-born artist Jutta Koether.

More old-fashioned still are examples of the textile-based artist Elaine Reichek's embroidery on linen, inspired by mythological motifs. Then there is an installation by Tom Thayer that will include collages, animations and delicate cutouts of human figures and storks so ephemeral one expects them to fly around the galleries by themselves in the night. "It's my utopia," Mr. Thayer said, as he worked on his installation the other afternoon.

Mike Kelley fans will see one of the last works he created before he died at 57, apparently by suicide, this month. On view will be videos that are part of his "Mobile Homestead," a full-scale model of the suburban house in Detroit where he grew up. "It's all about public art and the city of Detroit, its collapse and eventual gentrification," Mr. Sanders said.

The symbiotic relationship between fashion and art has been prevalent for a while now, and the biennial will include photographs by K8 Hardy, a feminist artist who will also stage a fashion show on the museum's fourth floor, pairing it with work by Oscar Tuazon, an artist known for his architectural sculptures. His pieces will start out in the museum's lobby but eventually be moved to become the runway for Ms. Hardy's fashion show.

The current vogue for abstraction, both in painting and sculpture, has not been forgotten. Two San Francisco artists will share the same gallery space on the third floor, Andrew Masullo with his small vibrantly colored canvases, and Vincent Fecteau with a group of sculptures made from cement, gypsum and clay.

And of course it wouldn't be a Whitney biennial without at least one outlandish installation. This year it's by Dawn Kasper, a Los Angeles artist who has literally moved into the museum. "Basically everything I own is here," Ms. Kasper said the other afternoon, wearing blue jeans, a hoodie and wool cap and standing in the middle of a chaotic space on the third floor containing her bed, piles of clothes and stacks of books: "Blade Runner," "Simply Vegetarian," "One Hundred Years of Solitude," to name a few. Some of her own photographs and collages were propped along the perimeter of the space, her "nomadic studio," as she calls it. Throughout the biennial, Ms. Kasper plans to make collages and drawings — part real-life studio practice, part performance. While the museum won't let her actually spend the night there, she said she planned to "take lots of naps."

